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Official Urges Coronet Probe

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The Tampa Tribune

PLANT CITY - A top environmental official wants a criminal investigation into allegations that Coronet Industries employees were ordered by the phosphate processor to dump toxic waste and deceive government inspectors.

The head of the Hillsborough County Environmental Protection Commission said he will contact the sheriff's and state attorney's offices about a broadcast Wednesday on WFLA, News Channel 8, in which former employees spoke of the plant's disregard for environmental laws.

The story was the result of a joint investigation by The Tampa Tribune and News Channel 8, both owned by Media General.

In a statement, Coronet said it cooperates with regulators and makes sure it ``meets or exceeds'' all requirements related to public safety and the environment.

``It would be inappropriate for Coronet to comment on preliminary environmental reports, incomplete data or unwarranted speculation about the company," the statement said.

The plant just south of the city limits has a history of environmental problems, and intentional violations should be dealt with harshly, said EPC Executive Director Richard Garrity.

The 100-year-old plant has aging, poorly maintained equipment that spews pollution into the air and occasionally discharges acidic water into English Creek, Garrity said.

Each year, 61 tons of dust, 60.5 tons of nitrogen oxide, 4.6 tons of carbon monoxide, 4 tons of hydrogen fluoride and 1.3 tons of lead flow from the plant, mainly from its smokestacks.

Former Coronet employees this week told reporters from The Tampa Tribune and News Channel 8 that they were instructed by their superiors to conceal pollution violations.

Garrity announced during a briefing Thursday for county commissioners that he would ask for a criminal investigation.

``I think it is unconscionable," said Commissioner Jan Platt, reacting to the employees' allegations.

Some commissioners chided Garrity for not keeping them informed of violations at the plant. Garrity conceded regulators probably should have contacted commissioners earlier.

Spokeswomen for the sheriff and the state attorney said they had not been contacted about environmental violations at Coronet.



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Even if some violations were hidden, regulators have found so many problems with Coronet that they have considered trying to shut it down, Garrity said.

The allegations come as health officials are investigating complaints of high cancer rates among those who live near the plant at 4904 Coronet Road. The plant produces an animal feed supplement called tricalcium phosphate from phosphate rock. Arsenic and other metals are byproducts.

'Visitors In The House'

Former shift supervisor Tony Hightower, a 42-year employee, said he received and eventually gave orders to shut down equipment emitting pollutants into the atmosphere - just in time for county and state inspectors to arrive.

"'Visitors in the house' was the call that came down from the front office, Hightower and another former employee, Jay Guilliams, recalled.

"'They would call and say they're coming Wednesday at 1 p.m.," Hightower said. "'And at 12 p.m., we would have everything shut down that puts out dust - the mill, the feed prep, everything."

Hightower, who was laid off last year, said the deceptions occurred during his career.

Inspectors didn't know enough about the plant's operations to realize what was happening, Hightower said.

EPC officials say they checked out reports of deception and found some were impossible to verify. But they found plenty of problems, they said.

If pollution is causing health problems in the area, Coronet may not be the only polluter to blame, they said. There are eight old landfills in the area, including two garbage dumps operated years ago by Plant City and a waste oil dump at Coronet. Wastewater stored on Coronet's land has high concentrations of a number of pollutants, such as lead and arsenic. But there is no evidence that any of it leached into underground water and flowed into the area, Garrity said.

More study is needed, he said.

Most people in the area drink water supplied by municipal wells operated by Plant City, but there are some private wells. A recent sampling found elevated levels of arsenic in one of 14 private wells tested, but the level wasn't high enough to pose a health risk, officials said.

County Commissioner Pat Frank said she worries that people who drank well water before city water was available in the early 1960s might develop cancer years later.

Buried Waste

Jeff Tennyson, a former maintenance mechanic who quit in 1991 when the plant was owned by Consolidated Minerals Inc., said he helped dump contaminants into pits on and around Coronet, or buried them underground throughout 1,300 acres where the 2,600-home Lakeside Station development is proposed. The Lakeside Station property is owned by Consolidated Minerals, but the company has a contract to sell it to builder Sunrise Homes.

Sunrise has asked the city to rezone the land, now known as Gregg Business Centre, for houses

and commercial and light industrial use. The development, just north of Coronet, would include a school site.

Onoda Chemical Industry Co. Ltd. and Mitsui & Co. Ltd. of Tokyo bought the Coronet plant in 1993.

Tennyson, who worked at Coronet for 10 years, said he dumped ``asbestos, oil, paint, contaminated equipment, oxygen bottles" and other chemicals in and around the plant.

Pads and screens placed on scrubber systems to remove hydrofluoric acid from air emissions weren't always used or were replaced quickly to pass inspections, said Guilliams, a carpenter who worked there 11 years until 1999. He said his job included climbing stack towers to change screens.

``Periodically, I would find that they were running [emission stacks] without the screens. I always told them they were sweeping stuff under the carpet. ... It all runs downhill and I was a part of it," he said. Guilliams said he would find the screenless scrubbers two or three times a year, with a dirty screen lying nearby.

Guilliams was injured on the job in 1992 and was terminated in 1999. He is fighting a workers' compensation claim denied him several years ago.

Hydrofluoric acid can cause damage to bones and teeth. Breathing in a large amount can also cause damage to the lungs and heart, according to a report from the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

The agency asked state health officials to conduct a public health assessment of neighborhoods surrounding the plant based on residents' concerns of cancer and other illnesses in two communities near Coronet.

The proposed Lakeside Station development - on hold for now - is between those two communities east and northwest of the plant.

The employees said they asked questions but thought too much prodding might cost them their jobs.

``We would go into safety meetings and tell them what was wrong. All we heard was `no money,' " Hightower said.

Tennyson said the problems existed before the sale.

``The problems were there when Browne Gregg [owner of Consolidated Minerals] owned it," Tennyson said.

Representatives at Gregg's office did not return phone calls Wednesday.

A Sunrise Homes spokesman, told of the former employees' claims, said his company was awaiting the outcome of the government health assessments.

``I am not interested in responding to anecdotal stuff," said Sunrise's land manager, Bob Appleyard. ``It doesn't cast an awful lot of light on something that's about to be studied in an objective way."

Employees Voice Regrets

The three former employees said they regret the things they did.

“I hate it,” Tennyson said. “I’m not surprised people are dying all around that community. The plant was in such bad shape when I left there, that they needed to shut it down then. It’s time that they be accountable.”

Hightower said he, too, hated to do things like shutting down dust-emitting equipment. But it was his livelihood. “I knew it was bad, but I needed my job.”

County EPC officials said they typically do not call Coronet to announce inspections, but there are occasions when they do.

“Our standard operating procedure dictates that the annual compliance inspection is unannounced,” said EPC’s air compliance chief, Sterlin Woodard. “Most inspections related to citizen complaints are the same way, but there are rare occasions when we would announce that we are coming.”

During some complaint investigations, EPC officials said they might call Coronet to ask whether the plant was having emissions problems.

EPC officials said they cannot tie any of the residents’ alleged health problems to Coronet’s history of pollution problems and air emissions, although they have threatened the plant owners with a shutdown if they fail to come into compliance by 2005.

Woodard said commission inspectors have received complaints, from Coronet employees and the public, about attempts to skirt environmental laws.

During a 1998 inspection prompted by a Coronet employee who was later fired, 27 violations were noted, mainly for poorly maintained equipment, Woodard said. An inspection in 2000 uncovered three or four violations, and one in 2001, nine or 10 violations, he said.

Hightower, 61, has severe breathing and sleep apnea problems and must use an oxygen tank. “I’m on it between 16 and 18 hours per day,” he said.

He acknowledged some of his health problems might be attributed to smoking, a habit he gave up four years ago. But he also says the exposure to chemicals and asbestos in the phosphate fertilizer industry have contributed. A letter written by his physician suggests his problems might, in part, be attributed to his work.

WFLA, News Channel 8, reporter Jennifer Leigh contributed to this report. Reporter Deborah Alberto can be reached at (813) 754-3765.

This story can be found at: <http://www.tampatrib.com/News/MGAGYXSP9ID.html>

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